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Revolutionary Spirit: Jose Rizal in Southeast Asia

JOHN NERY

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011, 280p.

Written on a research fellowship at the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, this book with a yellow cover perhaps betrays the author's sympathies for the current Aquino administration in the Philippines. It also seems to pay respect to the memory of the 1986 EDSA Revolution. In analyzing Rizal's modest place in Southeast Asian history and thought, the book offers a timely contribution to the sesquicentennial commemoration of the birth of the First Filipino.

It is a highly readable yet quite irritating companion volume to the body of writings by and on Rizal. F. Sionil Jose provides a pithy foreword, revealing that he "can even believe" Rizal's retraction of his "anti-Catholic" writings, a view contrary to that of Austin Coates whose biography on Rizal was republished by Sionil Jose's own publishing firm. Nery, however, takes the position that it "did not happen and is actually irrelevant to Rizal's achievement" (p.xix). While I agree with this position, the challenge nevertheless remains for one to write an in-depth examination of the retraction to once and for all determine which Rizal was really the Rizal of December 1896 and hopefully, end the debate.

After a message from the ISEAS director, a preface and a very long acknowledgement, which could have been appended to the former, Nery begins with a discussion of what he calls "the uses of error" on the factual inaccuracies, misinterpretations and distortions made by scholars, and authors who have written about Rizal. The reasons and explanations for them, as Nery tries to discern, are clearly articulated, particularly Miguel de Unamuno's "erroneous" characterization of Rizal as "a poet, a hero of thought and not of action" (p.23), a "Tagalog Quixote-Hamlet" (Unamuno in Retana 1907, 479), which reading drew an objective rebuttal from T.H. Pardo de Tavera, with Nery concluding that Unamuno had read his own life onto Rizal's. On the contrary, Rizal, for Nery, was no dreamer but "a kinetic actor" who "was perpetually wrestling with his will" (p.28). Unamuno's views continue to dazzle scholars; the latest anthology that carries his work is not the one edited by Daroy and Feria (1968), which Nery had cited, but *Himalay* (Melendrez-Cruz and Chua 1991), an anthology of Rizal studies by the Cultural Center of the Philippines in which a Tagalog translation of Unamuno's essay is included. A useful chronology from Rizal's birth to contemporary times, which have a bearing on Rizal, is part of the introduction.

Nery tackles two “turning points,” the title of the first chapter, which, to him, “are fundamental in understanding Rizal’s legacy in Southeast Asian imagination” (p.54). The first is Rizal’s identification as Malay, most especially the formation of a secret society called, enigmatically, Rd. L. M., with Nery favoring the interpretation of Rizal’s nephew Dr. Leoncio Lopez-Rizal as standing for “Redención de los Malayos” or redemption of the Malays. Nery could have explored the connection between Apolinario Mabini’s idea of a Malay federation and this group. Could Mabini be privy to the group’s intentions? The second is Rizal’s letters in Tagalog, which Nery frames as a “question of language” as it “was becoming more and more central to their (Filipino propagandists) attempt to found a nation” (p.67). The fact that Rizal wrote in Tagalog, laments Nery, “remains under-appreciated by Filipinos, even today” and that “some of the most important letters in the Rizal canon were written *in their own language*” (my italics). For native speakers of Tagalog like Nery, this expression would suit them but there are other Filipinos who have their own languages and that could perhaps explain the under-appreciation. Would it not be better to rephrase it as “in his [Rizal’s] native or mother tongue”? Nery, of course, is coming from a background in which Tagalog, renamed Pilipino, and Filipino, has been enthroned as the national language. Thus, it is anachronistic for Nery to refer to Tagalog as “their” language as if Rizal was writing for Filipinos today when in fact he wrote in his mother tongue for his family and friends.

The next two chapters try to establish the connection or more precisely, the complicity of Rizal with the revolution and how revolutionaries linked Rizal with the revolution and how they paid homage to Rizal after his death. The following seven chapters, the crux of the book, deal with the “influence” or in some instances it would be better to say impression, of Rizal on the part of different individuals and their varying historical contexts. Nery chronologically arranges his discussion, beginning with E. F. E. Douwes Dekker, the grandnephew of Multatuli, the author of *Max Havelaar*, which Rizal had read in 1888. Douwes Dekker wrote an account of Rizal after founding the pro-independence association, Indische Partij, in December 1912. The Indonesian communist revolutionary Tan Malaka came to Manila in 1925 and stayed for two years. Nery successfully provided the milieu in which the 1920s, a period that saw the resurgence of the spirit of Bonifacio, had shaped Tan Malaka’s 1948 autobiographical view of Rizal as “an intellectual in relative isolation from the masses” (p. 135). The sixth and seventh chapters tell the story behind the translation into Bahasa Indonesia, radio broadcast, and printing of Rizal’s farewell poem during the Japanese occupation, which served as an inspiration to the pemuda or Indonesian youth fighting for independence, and how the granting, or more accurately the recognition of Philippine independence by the US became an inspiration to the newly-born, still struggling Indonesian republic. A few passing references to Rizal in a number of speeches by Sukarno made Nery state that they do not “privilege either Rizal or the Philippines” (p. 183) and that the first Indonesian president “never read Rizal; he must have only read about him” (p. 187). In any case, one cannot discount the influence of a president mentioning Rizal’s name from a neighboring country, which Tan Malaka viewed as part

of greater Indonesia, in those speeches that led to the alleged popularity of Rizal, according to Rosihan Anwar (and I agree with this), among Indonesian students. The intellectual legacy of Rizal is fleshed out in the ninth chapter in which Nery tackles Malaysian intellectuals such as Syed Hussein Alatas and his *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), the theme of which had been earlier explored by Rizal in the essay, "On the Indolence of the Filipinos," and Shaharuddin bin Maaruf and his *Concept of a Hero in Malay Society* (1984), in which Rizal figured prominently. Finally, in the tenth chapter, Nery exposes the images of Rizal and the Philippines in the novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer; yet Nery does not really say how and when the Indonesian writer was inspired by Rizal.

The title is somewhat misleading, since the book only tackles Rizal's "influence" on island Southeast Asia, although Nery explicitly states in the preface that he did not discuss "the possible connection with Burmese or Vietnamese nationalists or his impact on the East Timor struggle for independence" (p. xix). Mariano Ponce, for instance, wrote *Ang mga Pilipino sa Indotsina* (1907). I haven't read it but it is an intriguing possibility, although I might be wrong. Such an admission promises another book on the same topic with a rigorous approach at measuring or delineating Rizal's "influence," which the present work sorely lacks because, again as the author confesses, it is "more journalism than scholarship" (p. xxv). The book only shows the intellectual elite's appropriation of Rizal; it is silent on how the ordinary people saw or claimed Rizal.

There are some issues on the technical aspects of the writing. I find the frequent use of parentheses for statements annoying (p. 2, *passim*) as the author wants to minimize their importance in the main narrative when some, if not all, are as relevant as the other details in the text. The use of author-date citation is unfortunate (p. 6, *passim*); the name of the author if mentioned in the beginning of the statement should be followed by the year and the page in parentheses or placed at the end. Nery mentions the author, and then repeats the name in the citation. It would have been better if, in the references, the date of publication is put after the name of the author. It is rather surprising that Ambeth Ocampo's popular and influential writings on Rizal are not consulted; his name missing in the acknowledgement strikes me as strange, since Nery and Ocampo both write for the same Manila publication.

Scattered sporadically in the text are some factual errors. Paciano Rizal should be Paciano Mercado based on the context (p. 32). The line of Rizal's poem *A la Juventud Filipina* lacks the article "la" between "bella esperanza de" and "patria mia" (p. 32). Nery gives the wrong impression that Antonino Guevara and Mariano Ponce wrote in English; both wrote in Spanish (p. 39). Having read Rizal's annotations of Morga, I do not remember Rizal making any "references to the pre-Spanish Philippines as a Malay polity" (p. 59; my emphasis). There are typographical errors in "Alvarez" (p. 98) and in "Petronila Daroy" (p. 260). The translation of "kasamang mamamayan" should be "fellow citizens," not "residents" nor "farmer-citizens" (p. 102). Ibn Batuta was not Malay (p. 107); he was a Moroccan Berber.

The appendixes are worth reading. “A” could be expanded into a book on Rizal’s letters. “B,” which debunks Renato Constantino’s view of Rizal, is markedly Floro Quibuyen in its use of arguments, but Quibuyen’s work is never cited. The omissions of Rizal’s letters by Renato Constantino to prove Rizal’s reformism, the misreading of the December 15 manifesto along with its proper context, and the flawed dichotomies casting Rizal either as reformist or revolutionary, bear this out. “C” is about the Indonesian translation of “Mi último adios.”

On a side note, it is interesting that Nery belonged to the Ateneo graduating class that celebrated the centenary of Rizal’s graduation. The diplomat Leon Ma. Guerrero, author of an important biography of Rizal, who was asked by the late historian Fr. Horacio de la Costa, S.J. for the occasion, spoke during the commencement exercises about Rizal and posed a question about how their batch would be commemorated a hundred years after. Nery will never know. But with this book, he is, I’m sure, memorializing Rizal’s greatness, which is also his and the Filipino people’s, for all the coming years.

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